

## In brief

**Dutch abortion rate falls:** The number of Dutch women aged under 19 who had an abortion fell to 7.8 per 1000 women last year from 8.8 in 2003, reflecting an overall fall in the number of abortions among women aged 15 to 45 to 8.6 per 1000 women from 8.7 in 2004. The UK figure for 2005 is 17.8 per 1000 women under 18 and in those aged 15 to 44. The Rutgers Nisso group ([www.rng.nl](http://www.rng.nl)), experts on sexuality, compiled the Dutch figures from the national abortion register.

**Australia's fertility rate rises:** The fertility rate in Australia has reached its highest level in a decade, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reports. In 2004 the national fertility rate was 1.77 babies per woman; last year it was 1.81. The rise is partly due to a "baby bonus" programme that offers cash payments to parents for each baby born, the Australian treasurer, Peter Costello, claimed.

**EC funds flu research:** The European Commission has awarded €28.3m (£19m, \$36m) to 17 human and animal health projects researching bird flu and pandemic flu. The funding is in addition to €21m that had already been allocated.

**Survey reports on experience of pain:** Just over half (51%) of carers in Great Britain who look after someone with chronic pain said that their patient's condition was managed adequately but not very well, reports a YouGov survey for the Patients Association ([www.patients-association.org.uk](http://www.patients-association.org.uk)). The survey of 3000 carers of people aged >65 with chronic pain also found that nearly a third (31%) of carers said their patient's chronic pain was managed poorly or very poorly.

**Sickle cell screening announced:** All babies in England are to be routinely offered screening with the heel prick test within two weeks of birth for sickle cell blood disorders. In Britain sickle cell disorders are most common in people of African or Afro-Caribbean descent. They affect about 12 500 people in England, and about 240 000 are carriers.

## Former FDA commissioner pleads guilty to two charges

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

Lester Crawford, the former commissioner of the US Food and Drug Administration, pleaded guilty in a district court in Washington, DC, last week to two charges: conflict of interest and failing to disclose financial holdings in companies that the FDA regulated. Each charge carries a maximum penalty of a year in prison and a fine. Dr Crawford will be sentenced on 22 January 2007.

Dr Crawford's lawyer, Barbara Van Gelder, told the Associated Press news agency that she expected Dr Crawford to be fined and placed on probation. The *Washingtonian* magazine said she is the lawyer to call if "you find yourself drawn into an awkward congressional investigation, or worse, a grand-jury investigation by the Justice Department or the US Attorney's office"



Dr Lester Crawford: "I accept full responsibility"

(*Washingtonian* Dec 2004, p 94).

The US Department of Justice had charged Dr Crawford with failing to disclose investments on forms required of senior officials at the FDA. He made false statements saying that he and his wife had sold stocks in organisations regulated by the FDA, such as PepsiCo, Sysco, Kimberly-Clark, and Embrex, or did not declare their holdings. He also did not dis-

close income from holdings in Embrex stock options or from ownership of Kimberly-Clark or Sysco stock.

The conflict of interest charge related to Dr Crawford's ownership of Sysco and PepsiCo stock and his role as chairman of the FDA's obesity working group, which made recommendations about relabelling the energy content of food products, such as soft drinks.

The Justice Department said there was no evidence that his stock ownership altered the findings of the FDA's working group.

In impromptu statements to several US newspapers Dr Crawford said, "This was my fault and no one else's, and I accept full responsibility ... Nothing that I have done, I hope, can be construed to affect the integrity of the FDA." Ms Van Gelder confirmed the statements.

Dr Crawford, who is a veterinarian and food safety expert, worked at the FDA for many years. He was deputy commissioner between February 2002 and March 2004, when he became acting commissioner. He was nominated to be commissioner, and this nomination was confirmed by the Senate in July 2005.

## Cancer group denies company funding will influence its agenda

Rory Watson *Brussels*

The organisers of a pan-European cancer campaign have denied claims that they are in the pocket of the drug industry. The new organisation, Cancer United ([www.cancerunited.org](http://www.cancerunited.org)), has received funding from Roche, the world's leading maker of anticancer drugs. The public relations firm Weber Shandwick is providing logistical support.

John Smyth, Cancer United's chairman, who is professor of medical oncology in Edinburgh and also the president of the Federation of European Cancer Societies, said that he had approached Roche for an unrestricted educational grant. The money would be used to cover the costs of six meetings of the executive board in Brussels over the next two years.

"It is all open and transparent," Professor Smyth said. "We

are totally independent and are not trying to sell anyone's drugs. The concept that the industry are bad guys is ridiculous. I have treated over 6000 cancer patients, and I know that patients want the latest technology."

Professor Smyth, who hopes that the new organisation can provide a forum in which to debate a partnership with industry, also made it clear that he had deliberately decided to look for a single source of funding rather than contacting several drug companies.

The involvement of Roche, which makes trastuzumab (Herceptin), licensed for early and late stage breast cancer, bevacizumab (Avastin) for bowel cancer, and erlotinib (Tarceva) for lung cancer, cast a cloud over the launch of Cancer United in Brussels last week.

Ian Gibson, a Labour MP who chairs the all party parliamentary group on cancer in the United Kingdom, was unable to attend the event but sent a message of support.

He later said that he had been "naïve" to have become involved. Alastair Campbell, the former press secretary at 10 Downing Street, who had taken part in a promotional video, also distanced himself from the initiative.

Cancer United's basic mission is to ensure equal access to cancer treatment for patients across Europe and to reduce the wide variations in access that currently exist.

The organisation, which brings together representatives from the medical profession, patients' groups, industry, and European and national policy makers, is pursuing two aims.

It is calling for the European Commission to develop a Europe wide cancer strategy and for all EU governments to implement national plans as exist in the UK and Italy.